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"'They Were Alone in the Room': The Room and Mind as Literary Containers in *Mrs. Dalloway*"

Abstract

At the beginning of Mrs. Dalloway, Virginia Woolf provides a wide entryway inside the home, uncrowded room, and mind of Clarissa. Both Woolf and Gaston Bachelard agree that thoughts, memories and emotions are housed within architectural absent spaces. Traditionally, the room is the site of female confinement, where women rest on the threshold of enclosed domestic spaces, and urban independence. Furthermore, intellectual spaces, like studies, are considered the man's domain, leaving women in need of rooms of their own. But Woolf complicates these associations. Rather than crossing the threshold into the outside patriarchal world, Clarissa chooses to stay inside the woman's domain. Unlike the stifling rooms at 22 Hyde Park Gate, Clarissa's "little room" becomes a psychologically expansive gendered receptacle.

While the spatial dimension of Clarissa's room is opened, at the same time, it serves as a cerebral container. These chambers are present in the work not only to demonstrate female confinement, but also in order to house the subversive potential of female subjectivity. With the trope of the window, Clarissa is far from entrapped, but rather, reconciles an unsettled division of past, present, and future. The space of the room as a setting becomes the site where Clarissa's consciousness unfolds. The room and window are repositories for her cultivation and manifestation. She becomes aware and content with her Self in the world. This sense of awareness springs from the enclosure of women in rooms, as shown in other works by Woolf, as well as other contemporary women's writing. When women choose to draw apart alone, and enclose themselves in these domestic spaces, they open the possibility of surpassing patriarchal relegation. Within such subversive, feminine spaces in Woolf, I argue, the mind is a crucible for the delineation of life and death, past and present, and the narrative compartmentalization of suppressed memory.

In many of Virginia Woolf's novels, her writing is often influenced by the severance of interior and exterior spaces. Her fiction is constructed by its reliance on imaginative conceptualizations, and is concerned with how the territory of the mind is informed by its interchange with external spaces and places. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, there is a shift from the exterior happenings on Bond Street, and a return to the interior space of Clarissa's home, more specifically, her room. While the room is traditionally the site of female confinement, where women rest on the threshold of enclosed domestic spaces, and urban independence, Woolf challenges this association. She asks how historical manifestations of interiority aligns with or disrupts social definitions of interior space. Housed in the room is human (feminine) interiority as an enshrined dimension, containing emotional and psychological significance, distinguished from outside social space. These spatial metaphors are not specific to Woolf's fiction only. Extracted from her *Diary*, written in 1924, she describes her progress on *Mrs. Dalloway* by explaining, 'I like going from one lighted room to another, such is my brain to me; lighted rooms' (310). Therefore, there is an optimism in the room's potential as a "lighted room." It becomes a creative and empowering space, rather than confining for women at the start of the new century. Because the threshold is temporarily opened, when the doors are taken off their hinges, the spatial dimension of Clarissa's room is also opened. At the same time, through her narrowing descriptions, her room serves as a cerebral container. These chambers are present in the work, not to demonstrate female confinement, but in order to house the subversive potential of female subjectivity.

The way in which Woolf describes the rooms at 22 Hyde Park Gate is representative of her divided mental state. As a child, she struggled with familial pressures and the Victorian con-

ventions that she was expected to uphold. These interior spaces equate a sense of isolation, being cut off from the modern city, or being encased in a constraining Victorian shell. Additionally, she longed for a private space to unleash her creativity. She explains the "'great cathedral space that was childhood' is like 'a great hall… with windows letting in strange lights; and murmurs and spaces of deep silence'" (Seeley 89). The home's private spaces are traditionally constructed by gender politics. In Woolf's essay on "Great Men's Houses" (1932) she delineates what these masculinely dominated houses felt like for women:

> … the house was necessarily a battlefield where daily, summer and winter, mistress and maid fought against dirt and cold… The stairs… Seem worn by the feet of harassed women carrying tin cans. The high paneled rooms seem to echo with the sound of pumping and the swish of scrubbing. The voice of the house… Is the voice of pumping and scrubbing, of coughing and groaning (Seeley 93-94).

Although, Woolf rebels against this representation. She once imagined creating a world from the bedrock of a single room. This room expanded into a house, and then a street of houses, and then a town where working women debated those social strictures of the time. Woolf saw the extreme need for women to have rooms of solitude, set apart from the world, in which she often felt like an outsider. Those earlier mentioned "spaces of deep silence" are suggestive of the potential that rooms have.

During Elizabeth's walk back home, Woolf melds interior and exterior space, in order to establish the spatial and psychic polarization between the two:

> She walked just a little way towards St. Paul's, shyly, like someone penetrating on tiptoe, exploring a strange house by night with a candle, on edge lest the owner should suddenly fling wide his bedroom door and ask her business, nor did she dare wander off into queer alleys, tempting bye-streets, anymore than in a strange house open doors which might be bedroom doors, or sitting room-doors, or lead straight to the larder (86).

By describing Clarissa's daughter as "a stray," the reader is hearkened back to those times when public, exterior spaces were closed off to women. This description can be read as a critique of conventional representations of the woman's sphere. More importantly, it signifies women's estrangement while outdoors, often alien to exterior spaces. By juxtaposing public and private spatial boundaries, Woolf redefines the relationship between interior and exterior space. As much as Elizabeth's narrative is an example of cultural resistance, and she is a female icon of modernity, being one of the first examples of a female flâneur, I still argue that it is *inside* that subjectivity unfolds. This disunity with the outside world is first evidenced when Clarissa peers in and out of windows.

At the beginning of the novel, Clarissa excitedly "burst(s) open the French windows," at her house in Bourton. However, only a few lines down she "stand(s) there at the open window, [feeling] that something awful was about to happen" (3). Woolf continues to use the trope of the window to signify conflicting emotions. At the time that Clarissa sets out on her walk, both London and her mind are equally in flux. In one regard "she love(s); life; London." In another, the aftermath of the war and Septimus's impending death looms overhead, and outside of windows (4). Her mind in motion continues on her walk through Bond Street, up the narrow corridor in

her house, and generates inside her room. On her way up the stairs, she pauses at the open window and "feel(s) herself suddenly shrivelled, aged, breastless… out of her body and brain which now failed." A few lines later, Woolf writes, "there was an emptiness about the heart of life; an attic room," and later repeats "so the room was an attic" (20). Initially, the narrowness of Clarissa's room informs her mixed emotions about life, death, and her aging body. Though, after a while, the space inside her room becomes the site where Clarissa's consciousness unfolds. Within such subversive spaces, the mind is a crucible for the delineation of life and death, past and present, and the narrative compartmentalization of suppressed memory. Once she reconciles her unsettled past with the present, she descends the staircase as a newly born virginal apparition, and is finally able to communicate with her guests. She exits the novel as simply herself: "it is Clarissa… there she was."

When women choose to draw apart alone, and enclose themselves in these domestic spaces, they open the possibility of surpassing patriarchal relegation. The summer that Clarissa went to stay at Bourton, her and Sally "sat, hour after hour, talking in her bedroom *at the top* of the house, talking about life, how they were to reform the world" (21, my emphasis). Here, the room is a prime example of female emancipation, as they are elevated *above* the site of the assigned woman's domain. Woolf recounts her own imagination, wandering from inside her bedroom, and beyond the open window. She writes of summer nights, where she "would lie with the window open, looking up at the sky… I recall a story I wrote then, about the stars and how in Egypt some savage was looking at them; and also listening" (Seeley 106). This is another example of an imaginative break from cultural oppression. Inside the room, is a space of unfettered movement. In "The Lady in the Looking Glass," Woolf describes Isabella's mind in this way:

> Her mind was like her room, in which lights advanced and retreated, came pirouetting and stepping delicately, spread their tails… her whole being was suffused, like the room again, with a cloud of some profound knowledge, some unspoken regret, and then she was full of locked drawers, stuffed with letters, like her cabinets (Seeley 111).

The narrator uses her poetic abilities, to construct a room as a mind in flux, much like Clarissa's. Rather than crossing the threshold into the outside patriarchal world, Clarissa chooses to stay inside the woman's domain. She does not feel suffocated *inside* the "little room," but rather, becomes aware and content with her Self in the world. Inside rooms, emotional and psychological fluidity is contained, and signified. Women come to terms with themselves, and the room becomes a site of dynamic female potential — it is the birthplace of many female writers, poets, and a place for the mind to analyze the human soul.

The sense of awareness that emerges from the enclosure of women in rooms, is expressed in other contemporary works, such as Eavan Boland's *A Journey With Two Maps: Becoming A Woman Poet*. Boland tells of the difficulties she faced as a female writer, growing up in Ireland. She recounts writing the words 'woman' and 'poet,' on the same page, seeming as if they were in magnetic opposition to each other. She describes her relationship with her parents as being "… made up of distances, of empty rooms," and spent countless nights, staring at photos and reading of heroines, in Victorian encyclopedias (27). It is inside the room that Boland first felt marginalized and excluded. She described the uneasy feelings she initially experienced, in rooms, and in a home where she felt nothing like a heroine. She writes, "… up in my room… In me it lay somewhere between the mind and the body, a lost soul at that point waiting for a definition" (30).

However, she concludes that a female poet is born out of a place that is linked to resistance to its tradition, and its defiance of it. Female poets and artists are cultivated inside long-established male centered spaces, by opening their minds. Janet Wolff also argues for the importance of women alone in interiors: 'my room is so delicious after a whole day outside, it seems to me that I am not myself except in my room' (Shiach 258). We find these sentiments in Woolf's most notable feminist essay, *A Room of One's Own*, as well as in *Mrs. Dalloway*. Unlike the stifling rooms at 22 Hyde Park Gate, these *little rooms* become psychologically expansive gendered receptacles. They are repositories which replace the restrictive Victorian model of "the angel in the house" with *new* subjectivities played out inside.

In Gaston Bachelard's, *The Poetics of Space*, he attempts to construct a phenomenological study of those thoughts and emotions most valued. One's most intimate memories, and the place where children first come to consciousness, is inside the house. It is the most intimate of all spaces, and serves as protection for the daydreamer. Like Woolf, Bachelard believes that thoughts, memories and emotions are *housed* within. Those memories are accessible through the location of our intimate spaces. In much of Woolf's writing, she uses the room metaphor (sometimes alternately a *chamber* or a *dome*) as containers of human subjectivity. For instance, in her novel *The Voyage Out*, she describes her narrator as moving in and out of rooms, as a metaphor for moving in and out of people's minds. In *Orlando*, the protagonist's psychological transformation happened "in the chambers of his brain" (64). And in *Jacob's Room*, Professor Huxtable's old brain is described as a "corridor," and a "dome" (50). By describing the room as well lit, Woolf herself depicts the mind as an imaginative container of creative processes. And again, she juxtaposes the interior with the exterior when she continues writing in her diary "& the walks in

the fields are corridors" (310). Although outdoor walks cultivated her creativity, the topography of her brain is characterized inside the room. While it can contain uneasy and conflicting feelings, it can also be seen as a site of growth and renewal. This is apparent in Clarissa's surveillance of the old woman who moves about her room: "here was one room; there was another" (80). And as Big Ben continues to strike, Clarissa begins to *embrace* death (or time's passing), rather than fear it.

Behind the window, Clarissa is far from enclosed, but rather, synthesizes an unsettled division of past, present, and future. When peering outside of Mrs. Pym's flower shop window, she takes in psychological torment, since she is akin to Septimus, and their stories parallel one another's. Up in her room, she projects their mental warfare, by watching the old lady "in the room opposite… crossing the room." She no longer feels pity on Septimus, or herself and the hopeful lit room becomes dark: "There! the old lady had put out her light!," though, Clarissa feels content (116). Psychological growth emerges out of spaces submersed in both light *and* darkness. Woolf describes her rereading of *Mrs. Dalloway* as seeming "to leave me plunged deep in the richest strata of my mind," and inside, Clarissa is also plunged deep into the layers of her mind when "she come[s] in from the little room" feeling satisfied that they were able to *throw it away* (323). Down on the main floor, as the rooms begin to empty, Lady Rosseter expresses, what could be, the moral of the story: 'What does the brain matter… compared with the heart?' (121). Most significantly, Clarissa is able to move her mind from the enclosure of her room, and return to another emptying room, with a revised spatial configuration of her innermost thoughts. She compartmentalizes her thoughts, and her heart is finally at peace with time and space.

To close, in 1929 Woolf wrote what could be considered the cornerstone of 19th-century feminist literature *A Room of One's Own,* where her first concern is material conditions and its relationship to literature. She writes: "The whole of the mind must lie wide open if we are to get the sense that the writer is communicating his experience with perfect fullness. There must be freedom and there must be peace. Not a wheel must grate, not a light glimmer," and this expansiveness is a spatial metaphor of the imagination since she imagines that it is inside a woman's private room where her mind "… transmits emotion without impediment… is naturally creative, incandescent, [and] undivided" (103, 97). At the end of the essay, she explains female space in this way:

> The rooms differ so completely; they are calm or thunderous; open on to the sea, or, on the contrary, give on to a prison yard; are hung with washing; or alive with opals and silks; are hard as horsehair or soft as feathers—one has only to go into any room in any street for the whole of that extremely complex force of femininity to fly in one's face. How should it be otherwise? For women have sat indoors all these millions of years, so that by this time the very walls are permeated by their creative force, which has, indeed, so overcharged the capacity of bricks and mortar that it must needs harness itself to pens and brushes and business and politics (86).

The mind and heart in rooms are then containers, that mirror exterior spaces, while we reflect on our past. At the same time, they contradict exterior spaces in order to present liberating readings

of literary representation. The room as a subversive Other space, is testament to Woolf's prolific meanings of spatial imaginations.

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